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**Perspective—Latin America: The Broader Benefits of Counternarcotics
Programs**

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Colombia's Vichada Department: Trafficking on the Rise (C NF)
John Wetzel, CNC, secure 77973, and Capt. Tom Leard, US Southern Command~~Secret~~**DI IN SITREP 93-011**
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Review** ☐

December 1993

Perspective**Latin America: The Broader Benefits of Counternarcotics Programs** ☐

Although the ultimate measure of the success of counternarcotics programs is achieving a substantial net reduction in the supply of drugs to the United States, counternarcotics efforts can also have a positive impact on strengthening host-nation democratic processes and institutions. This Perspective, which does not represent a coordinated Directorate of Intelligence assessment, is intended to be speculative and to generate discussion on that issue. ☐

Latin American governments are increasingly realizing important domestic political dividends from pursuing aggressive antidrug policies. These governments politically benefit by reclaiming a measure of control of their countries' destinies from drug lords whose power and wealth have corrupted political, security, and judicial institutions and undermined government authority. Although governments remain plagued by corruption, bureaucratic rivalries, and political indecision, counternarcotics programs are strengthening democratic processes and institutions, enhancing the confidence and capability of governments to confront a host of other serious problems—including insurgencies and terrorism. ☐

Most of the Latin American governments are gaining confidence in the capabilities of their security forces and finding there is growing public and elite support for tougher law enforcement against traffickers. In Colombia and Bolivia, the police in recent years have demonstrated they can mount aggressive campaigns against traffickers, even though penetrations by traffickers remain a problem. Bogota's dramatic success in hunting down fugitive Medellin drug lord Pablo Escobar boosted the morale, resolve, and prestige of the Colombian police antidrug units—and those in other countries as well. Flush with this success and with widespread public and political acclaim for getting Escobar, some high-level officials in Bogota are pushing for more aggressive law enforcement tactics against the Cali kingpins. ☐

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Colombian military units that have received antidrug training—enhancing their tactical proficiency and operational discipline, including respect for human rights—have been deployed in counterinsurgency operations.

With the improved capabilities of antidrug security forces, regional governments have **demonstrated they can assert authority in remote areas** where they have long had little or no influence. Although maintaining only a limited presence in the remote Beni and Chapare regions of Bolivia, police counternarcotics sweeps have denied traffickers unconstrained use of these traditional trafficking areas, disrupting their narcotics activities and keeping them off-balance. In Peru, increased security force deployments and more sustained law enforcement efforts against the drug trade in the Huallaga Valley have not only caused much trafficking activity to shift elsewhere but also have forced the Sendero Luminoso and other insurgents to adopt a lower profile and weakened their support base.

Government recognition of the trafficking threat is **enhancing regional cooperation against the cocaine trade, potentially forging the way for dealing with other transnational threats.**

The increased determination and effectiveness of governments to confront the domestic impact of the drug trade strengthens public faith in democratic political institutions. **Corruption and violence, for example, have become potent political issues throughout Latin America**, with populaces expecting governments to do something about both. In the last year, public reaction to evidence of corruption was a key factor in the resignation of Brazilian President Collor and the impeachment of President Perez in Venezuela, and perceptions of increasing violence hit a political nerve in Mexico.

corruption is increasingly seen as getting out of hand and undermining the quality of government. Drug money is particularly insidious because of the large amounts involved, and most governments have a public mandate to crack down on corruption. Terrorist violence, whether by traffickers or by insurgent or other groups with political agendas, is also of growing concern, particularly when it threatens tourism and other business interests. Bogota had strong support for its crackdown against the Medellin traffickers because of their penchant for violence, and the Mexican Government is increasing pressure on drug organizations that are responsible for gang wars that have resulted in the deaths of several tourists and the Archbishop of Guadalajara.

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Judicial reforms undertaken as a cornerstone of counternarcotics policy in Colombia have **strengthened the criminal justice system and enhanced its credibility**. With US support, Colombia is putting in place an adversarial system of justice and a new criminal procedures code that are improving its ability to investigate and prosecute narcotics crimes, including drug-related corruption. Because of measures to ensure the protection of judges, investigators, and witnesses, the judiciary has mostly withstood efforts by traffickers to intimidate or corrupt its officials. Although trafficker influence has delayed antidrug legislation and led to key provisions in the criminal code that allow for lenient sentence reductions for drug criminals who implicate their confederates, the judicial system itself is stronger and more resistant to bribery and coercion. Meanwhile, Venezuela has passed tough laws and sanctions against money laundering, and Chile will soon follow suit. []

Perhaps most important, the integrity of democratic political processes in Latin America has also benefited from increased emphasis on counternarcotics. Although they remain able to infiltrate the police and other security forces and to buy influence with leading politicians, **traffickers have become politically discredited** in most Latin American countries. Powerful kingpins increasingly are viewed as a threat to government institutions and political systems. Known traffickers no longer can openly compete in elections—as did Pablo Escobar in the early 1980s—or dominate entire governments, as happened in Bolivia during the 1980-81 Garcia Meza “narcodictatorship.” Allegations of ties to drug kingpins are increasingly politically damaging to politicians. Indeed, Colombian presidential candidate Ernesto Samper-[]

[] was put on the defensive after a known trafficker declared his support for Samper. []

Corruption and sometimes significant political opposition will remain major impediments to counternarcotics programs, and Latin American governments will remain largely dependent on US support and continue to look for a strong US antidrug commitment. Nevertheless, strong counternarcotics programs bolster democratic institutions and increase the capacity of governments to cope with other threats to stability and prosperity. Recognizing the benefits, **Latin American governments are likely to enhance their antidrug efforts** as they try to enhance their own credibility with populations increasingly looking for integrity and competency in government. []

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